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What Kind of Fire Service? The Development of the British Fire Service, c.1833-1951

The British fire service has a rich and colourful history, replete with devastating fires, thrilling escapes, heroic feats, and charismatic characters. Key individuals have tended to attract the lion's share of historical interest, notably the chief officers of prominent brigades who left a legacy of innovation and leadership that can be traced through various manuals of firemanship, brigade orders and log books. These include, most famously, James Braidwood, the much venerated 'Father of the Fire Service', and Captain Eyre Massey Shaw, the charismatic lothario and 'Fire King' of the Metropolis, but there are many others who were active in provincial fire-fighting. Other influences can be traced through the records of the various service associations that have played a critical role in shaping the professionalization of the service. For example, the Fire Brigades Union has been pivotal in establishing, defending and diversifying the firefighter's professional role since its formation in 1918.

The focus of this historical overview is on the professionalization of firefighting as a uniformed, disciplined and organised service, publicly funded and locally delivered. It charts the two main models of professional firefighting, both of which originated in the early to mid-nineteenth century – James Braidwood's model of independent fire brigades and the alternative model of the police fire brigade – and traces their subsequent influence over the evolution of the fire service up to the mid twentieth century.¹

This was the defining period for the development of a professional identity within the service, generated 'on the job' and shared via various channels, including its own professional literature, brigade training, study tours, and membership of associations of firefighters. I will identify the main organisational phases in the service's fledgling history,

¹ For a more detailed analysis of the development of the service over a longer period of term, see my book, Shane Ewen, *Fighting Fires: Creating the British Fire Service, 1800-1978* (Basingstoke, 2010). This short overview is based on research for this book.

paying close attention to the different types of fire brigades that operated in the period leading up to the creation of the National Fire Service in 1941. Key individuals will be discussed – James Braidwood, Captain Shaw, John Horner, for example – but I want to stress that these men – as the public faces and leaders of the service – were reliant on the daily work of the men and women under their command to maintain operational efficiency. Rank-and-file firefighters were at the forefront of building the fire service: they performed fire inspection duties, maintained, drove and operated the fire appliances, climbed the ladders to effect fire rescues, and operated firefighting equipment to tackle outbreaks of fire. This also extended to more mundane daily tasks such as the controversial ‘spit and polish’ duties of cleaning firefighting equipment, performing drill, fitting and maintaining fire safety equipment, and inspecting infrastructure like hydrants and water tanks. The development of the British fire service was very much a collective effort on the part of senior officers and rank-and-file firefighters, which can be traced to the fire station as well as onto the fire-ground and into the corridors of Westminster and Whitehall.

The Braidwood model

The Victorian fire service was far from the unified and integrated national organisation which developed in the years during and after the Second World War. Until 1938, it was left to the discretion of local communities as to how they should organise their own fire brigade – whether it should be a public responsibility of the local authority, a volunteer effort or a private service run by those fire insurance companies with local branches. The earliest organised brigades had, since London’s great fire of 1666, been run by insurance companies in order to protect their interests against loss, whilst in many places firefighting was seen as the collective civic duty of a town’s male population. The beginnings of local government

taking control of firefighting occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in fast industrialising towns like Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh. This was a way of providing an improved standard of fire protection in towns with new and emerging risks. The earliest public fire brigades were funded through a combination of property taxation, contributions from the insurance companies, and fees for attending certain fires, chiefly those outside the local authority's boundaries. The vast majority of the firefighters were retained, only working when they were required, for which they were paid expenses and an annual retainer; some, as we shall see, were police constables.

It suited the insurance companies to transfer responsibility for firefighting to local government because of the growing expense of equipment and appliances, especially following the introduction of steam fire engines in the second third of the nineteenth century, as well as rising labour costs. Elsewhere, notably in the capital, the companies co-ordinated their operational resources in order to better spread their risks and share in the rising costs of firefighting – the formation of the London Fire Engine Establishment in 1833, which protected the capital until the mid-1860s, heralded the arrival of James Braidwood, formerly the chief superintendent at Edinburgh's fire engine establishment, where he had revolutionised the organisation of fire protection since his appointment shortly before Edinburgh's great fire of 1824, which destroyed a large part of the Old Town.

Braidwood's model of fire protection was founded on four key principles, which he outlined in a famous manual, *On the Construction of Fire-Engines and Appliances, The Training of Firemen, and the Method of Proceeding in Cases of Fire*, which was first published in 1830:

- (i) The appointment and training of disciplined and uniformed men on a retained basis (Braidwood's preference was for a combination of ex-sailors and skilled artisans, the former being suited to the austere discipline of the job, while the latter brought much-needed expertise in building design and construction)²;
- (ii) Their mastery of technology and water, especially in fighting fires from within buildings, rather than wastefully throwing water from the outside;
- (iii) The importance of establishing centralised command from a central fire station and clear officer command, alongside decentralised operations on the fireground;
- (iv) Brigades should be organisationally independent of other sectional and operational interests, such as the local police or militia, and not subject to the principles of competition practised by the insurance companies, whose brigades would often race each other to a fire. Braidwood's emphasis was on a collaborative effort, under his single command, to combat the threat from fire.

This proved to be a successful model, being duplicated in other large towns throughout the century, and rolled out in London following Braidwood's appointment as chief superintendent of the LFEE. The fact that the LFEE headhunted Braidwood to lead this new organisation indicates the support for his model of economical and efficient firefighting – it

² With a few exceptions in all-female colleges and workplaces, the first women to be appointed to positions in the public fire service were members of the Auxiliary Fire Service, which was established on the eve of the Second World War. Though trained for fire-fighting, auxiliary female fire-fighters were generally used in support roles. Women became full-time personnel with their own ranks and uniform after 1941 with the nationalisation of the fire service, but many were demobilised after the War. The first peacetime professional female fire-fighter was appointed to London Fire Brigade in 1982.

pleased his employers whilst also enabling him to build a large pool of semi-professional firefighters.

Braidwood's name became synonymous with the development of an ethos of professional firefighting. Revered by his men, who were popularly known as 'Jimmy Braiders', Braidwood made a point of attending all fires unless he was away from the city, where he could lead by example. It was this approach that led to his death at the Tooley Street fire in June 1861, and which subsequently led to the transfer of London's fire protection into public control. The fire, the largest in London since the great fire of 1666, ripped through a succession of six-storey warehouses, fuelled by a volatile cocktail of flammable goods brought into the city from across the British Empire – hemp, saltpetre, tallow, tea, sugar, spices, cotton and oil. Taking two weeks to bring under control, it involved unprecedented fire losses estimated at around £2 million. On the first evening of operations, Braidwood toured the fireground, giving liquid encouragement to his men, when a large section of warehouse wall bulged, cracked and then collapsed onto him, killing him instantly. His body was later recovered and he was given a large public funeral, which was attended by London's civic leaders and was likened to the funeral of the Duke of Wellington, who had died nine years earlier. The coffin, draped in a Union Jack flag with his belt, axe and helmet on the top, was carried on the back of a fire engine, flanked by his men, from the central fire station to Abney Park Cemetery, where he was buried beside his stepson, a fellow firefighter who had been killed on duty five years earlier. And so began another tradition in the subsequent history of the fire service, the firefighter's funeral, which was specially reserved for those who had paid the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty.³

³ For more on Braidwood's life and work, see Brian Henham, *True Hero: The Life and Times of James Braidwood: Father of the British Fire Service* (Romford, 2000).

The 'fire police' model

Braidwood's model pointed the way forward for the development of a professional fire service, as well as for the ways that firefighters and the public commemorate their fallen comrades. A second model of fire protection prevalent during the nineteenth century, as well as the first-half of the twentieth century, offered an alternative route for the fire service, albeit one still geared towards professionalisation. The 'fire police' model largely developed after the passing of the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act, although its roots can be dated to local police reform in industrial towns like Glasgow and Manchester during the 1780s and 1790s. The 1835 Act encouraged towns to establish borough police forces funded from local taxation; from 1856 police income was supplemented by a government grant and the service was subjected to control by the Home Office and a national inspectorate, H.M. Inspectors of Constabulary. This proved popular with many industrial towns across the midlands and north-west, which promptly established firefighting units within their police forces in order to qualify for the annual grant. The firefighters were sworn in as police constables, which made them liable for police duty, and they were trained in the particularities of fire work by a suitably qualified superintendent, who was usually responsible for maintaining the fire engines and appliances.

There was, by the turn of the twentieth century, a huge variation in practice across the country, which was dependent on the policy of the local authority, the attitude of the police chief constable towards firefighting operations, and the reputation of the fire brigade within the local community. There were large numbers of full-time 'police-firemen' in police brigades like Bristol, Nottingham, Glasgow, Sheffield and Leeds, who did not perform police work and spent their entire time on fire work. In fact, they worked for longer hours than their

police colleagues, often performing ‘continuous duty’, and increasingly lived separate lives to the police, being housed and trained in purpose-built fire stations or in housing adjacent to stations. These brigades were often highly regarded in their local communities, and owed much of their quasi-autonomy to their chief superintendents, like Henry Baker in Leeds, who made strong cases for investment in personnel and appliances to provide a good standard of public service. In other cases, small numbers of retained firefighters were hired in medium-sized towns like Worcester, Gloucester, Sunderland and Gateshead who worked alongside trained police constables at fires. Finally, in a few police brigades like Liverpool and Norwich, firefighting was seen as an ‘additional police duty’ to do performed by any trained constable, although there were few instances when this was required in practice.

There were even moves to integrate the London Fire Engine Establishment into the Metropolitan Police after Braidwood’s death, and Select Committees in the 1860s and 1870s recommended this. As one Commissioner of Police put it, ‘it has always appeared to me that the preservation of life and property from fire ought to be as much a part of the duty of the police as preservation from thieves, and murderers, and burglars.’⁴ Fortunately, Braidwood’s successor, Captain Eyre Massey Shaw, had experienced the ‘fire police’ model at Belfast and he too advocated operational independence. When, in 1865, the brigade was transferred into public control, it remained an independent body to the police. The Metropolitan Fire Brigade, as it was known, would be founded on the Braidwood model rather than the more ubiquitous ‘fire police’ model.

⁴ PP (1862) *Report of the Select Committee on Fires in the Metropolis together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, appendix and index*, IX, Cmd. 221, p.104, Q.106.

Despite the varied operational and organisational practice across the police fire brigades, there are a few common features to draw out, which help explain the differences in the respective models of operation:

- (i) The superintendent of fire engines, as he was commonly called, oversaw firefighting operations, but was subservient to his chief constable in all other matters. Thus, staffing, procurement and disciplining were all subject to this chain of command. In some towns, like Glasgow, police officers would even superintend at fires in the absence of senior fire officers, which was obviously a bone of contention.
- (ii) It kept running costs down as well as capital costs where there were shared police and fire stations.
- (iii) It was an economical model of governance because, by being part of the police force, this meant that, after 1856 especially, the fire brigade could benefit from central government funding for the police service so long as operations did not interfere with regular police duty.

A public service

Notwithstanding the variations in practice across the country, from the mid-1860s the fire service was increasingly recognised as a public service responding to a growing number and variety of emergencies. Life-saving was added to the agreed duties of firefighters, as well as the protection of property, most famously in London with the transfer of the fire escape ladders to the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, now under Captain Shaw's supervision, from the

volunteer-run Society for the Protection of Life from Fire in 1867. Fire protection had become, by 1899, in the words of one supportive MP, ‘a public duty, and not a duty to be put upon the shoulders of private individuals and left to voluntary agents and private munificence, and there should be one system adopted throughout the country.’⁵ Firefighters, politicians, and other interested parties started to discuss optimum turn-out times and planned for urban and suburban expansion by building new branch fire stations to optimise responses. Fire cover standards were drawn up as a public issue, rather than a matter of interest to insurance companies only, and the standard of protection provided by brigades was compared in the pages of the professional press (the earliest known periodical was *The Fireman*, launched in 1877, followed by *Fire & Water*, in 1884, and *Fire*, in 1908). This marks the beginning of the campaign for greater uniformity – in equipment, uniforms, pay and conditions – and a national minimum standard of cover.

By the turn of the twentieth century, local brigades were responding to other special service incidents (SSIs): some, as in Leeds and Sheffield, operated street ambulance services, others responded to floods and other extreme weather emergencies, whilst the more responsible brigades provided fire inspection services in factories and places of public amusement, including theatres and cinemas, which was prompted by several prominent fire disasters during the 1890s and 1900s. The larger, more professional and independent brigades – London, Birmingham, Croydon, Edinburgh and Leicester, for instance – also started to provide fire safety educational programmes in their communities, targeting vulnerable groups, most notably mothers of young infants and school-children, with their safety messages regarding the dangers of playing with matches or lighted candles, or the risks of not guarding a fireplace in the home.

⁵ House of Commons Debates, 12 April 1899, column 888.

Firefighters were also, following the well-established German example, increasingly expected to have greater professional and technical knowledge about the science of combustibility and the risks posed by new hazardous substances like plastics and petrochemicals. High-rise building development posed further challenges to fire engineers as well as firefighters, who needed to use hook ladders to scale great heights quickly and safely. With increasing responsibility came greater specialisation in role, with the emergence of second and third officers, visiting officers, engineers and such like. When hiring firefighters, recruiters increasingly looked for men with specialised skills and an aptitude for learning, as well as the pre-existing requisites of being disciplined and obedient to officer command structures. There was no sustained discussion about whether women could perform fire-fighting work at the time, which was explicitly regarded as a masculine job. The historic links between policing and firefighting as overlapping roles were, however, being openly challenged. As one witness to a parliamentary inquiry put it, when asked about the differences between the police recruit and the firefighter, ‘the former is a big man, of commanding presence, thoughtful and slow to act; the latter is of the middle height, wiry, intrepid and quick in movement.’⁶

By the late nineteenth century, then, the tide was slowly beginning to turn against police brigades in favour of Braidwood’s independent model. A number of public inquiries flagged up the significance of independence to the fire service’s efficiency, while newspapers contrasted what they saw as the efficient independent brigades with the less efficient retained, police and volunteer brigades. Various notable fires occurred where members of the public, and firefighters themselves, lost their lives because of stretched resources or insufficient numbers of qualified personnel. For example, Birmingham Town Council’s decision to

⁶ PP (1867) *Report from the Select Committee on Fire Protection together with the proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence and Appendix*, X, Cmd. 471, p.53, Q.1394.

separate its police and fire services in 1879 followed public condemnation of the police brigade's bungled operations at a house fire a year earlier, which led to the deaths of four persons. The police had been too pre-occupied with life-saving and firefighting operations to prevent a large and boisterous crowd from interfering, which inadvertently led to a three-month old child being dropped to his death from a burning fire escape. In 1898, a fire that started in a draper's shop on Sunderland High Street destroyed a large part of the town centre, causing property damage estimated at £130,000, which was a staggering amount of loss in a town with a rateable value of approximately £500,000. The borough council came in for stinging criticism, not least because its under-strength police brigade did not have a steam engine, but was expected to rely on hose reels and the pressure in the water mains, which failed its firefighters on the day. The Norwich police brigade – with its 117 police constables liable for fire duty and sole full-time firefighter – received similar criticism following a large fire there in the same year, which involved the destruction of the subscription library and the loss of 60,000 rare and valuable books, as well as damage to a rope manufactory and department store. The damage would have been greater were it not for the help provided by nearby private works brigades. Towns protected by police fire brigades were, then, increasingly linked with higher levels of fire damage on average than those towns with independent, well-equipped brigades.

These examples were cited by the increasingly vocal and connected professional elements within the service as evidence of the need to introduce minimum standards of fire protection across the country. These included the service associations, such as the National Fire Brigades Union (later renamed the National Fire Brigades Association to avoid confusion with the Fire Brigades Union), founded in 1887 to represent the interests of its largely volunteer membership; the Association for Professional Fire Brigade Officers, founded in 1902 to further the interests of senior officers (later renamed the Professional Fire

Brigades Association); the Institution of Fire Engineers, founded by professional firefighters in 1918 to introduce a national system of accredited training, and the Firemen’s Trade Union (later renamed the Fire Brigades Union in 1930 to avoid confusion with the railway and ships’ firemen’s union), founded in 1918 to improve the working conditions of its members. Left to their own devices, these associations argued, too many local authorities had proven themselves incapable of taking their town’s safety seriously, preferring to gamble with both their town’s property and the safety of the general public.

Fig. 1. Types of fire brigades in English and Welsh boroughs, 1903-32⁷

<i>Date</i>	<i>Size of sample</i>	<i>Independent professional brigades (%)</i>	<i>Police fire brigades (%)</i>	<i>Retained (%)</i>	<i>Voluntary (%)</i>
1903	89	12.3	42.7	36.0	9.0
1920	101	43.6	23.8	19.8	12.8
1932	105	48.6	41.0	6.6	3.8

If we look at figures for the various types of fire brigades in the early twentieth century (Fig.

1), we can identify some useful trends:

- I. A steady increase in full-time, professional fire services during the early twentieth century, with a particularly marked increase in the first two decades;

⁷ Figures taken from Shane Ewen, ‘Central Government and the Modernization of the British Fire Service, 1900-38’, *Twentieth-Century British History*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2003), pp.317-338.

- II. A fluctuation in ‘police fire’ organisation, falling in line with the rise of independent brigades in the first decades, but then rising again during the 1920s and early 1930s. This reflects the changing economic and political context of the time where, during a time of austerity, public service cuts forced many local authorities to integrate the two services again, as was the case in Manchester when, in 1920, the city council controversially merged its fire brigade with the police following the award of an 8-hour working day to the city’s firefighters. Bradford’s borough council similarly integrated its two services in 1932, reducing the number of full-time firefighters and drawing on a reserve of auxiliary constables as back-up. It is noticeable that both councils made these decisions shortly after their brigades had formed trade union branches affiliated with the Fire Brigades Union, with which their senior officers were resistant to negotiate local working conditions.
- III. A consistent and steady fall in the proportion of retained fire brigades as professionalization spread across the country, but especially in smaller and medium sized towns. The principle of part-time work was diminishing in these urban centres, especially as the complexity and variety of firefighting work was increasing.
- IV. The almost complete disappearance of the voluntary ethos from borough fire protection by the 1930s. We see here that a clear consensus had emerged for paid, professional firefighting as a public duty.

The campaign for police parity

In 1918 and 1919 the police service underwent a series of strikes in major urban centres for the first, and only, time in its history, contributing to a tumultuous period in British labour relations. The 1918 strike was organised by the National Union of Police and Prison Officers

(NUPPO), which wanted to be officially recognised as the representative voice of police workers, and followed the unfair dismissal of one of its members in the Metropolitan Police. The main demands of the striking officers was for improved pay and war bonuses, extended pension rights to include widows of police officers and allowances for school-aged children.

The strikes had three main outcomes for the police service, which subsequently had a significant bearing on the development of the fire service during the inter-war period. First, it established the principle of public inquiry in managing labour disputes within public services, with the formation of a select committee, chaired by Lord Desborough, which was responsible for making recommendations concerning the future organisation and conditions of the police. Second, it was key to the long-running professionalisation of the police, by legitimising the creation of a national public service with uniform conditions of service that would be agreed by negotiation between the different service associations. It considerably raised the profile of the police service amongst both the general public and the government, and helped make the police a respectable and rewarding career route for aspiring working-class applicants. Thirdly, it successfully challenged the principle of trade unionism within the police service on the grounds of public safety. Union affiliation was considered to be at odds with the practice of constabulary independence. The passing of the Police Act, 1919, whilst introducing substantially improved conditions across the service, statutorily removed the police's right to strike or to affiliate with a trade union; NUPPO was specifically outlawed. Instead, officers could join the Police Federation as the representative staff association for negotiating pay and conditions with the other service associations.

The immediate consequence of this episode for the fire service was that it exposed the differences between the independent brigades and the police brigades. On the one hand, it materially improved the pay and conditions for those firefighters who worked for police brigades, whilst, on the other hand, prohibiting them from joining any of the fire trade unions.

Police reform thus triggered the next stage in the development of a professional public fire service free from external influence – the campaign for parity with the police. The chief argument put forward by the service associations, including union leaders, was that they needed parity to standardise the service and to prevent the loss of good men to other skilled working-class professions. To firefighters, the police provided the model of a well-run public service that enjoyed operational freedom, regulation and good conditions of service, including a guaranteed pension; the only significant difference was that the fire service would remain a unionised profession. The demand for parity was never just about pay and pensions; it was about firefighters' sense of self-worth too.

The campaign for police parity strengthened the cause of trade unionism within the fire service because it raised the issue of workers' rights and conditions of service across the local government sector. It put the fire service on a national stage, raised the profile of firefighters beyond their local communities, and demonstrated how conditions of service in a large professional brigade like London were connected to those in smaller, provincial brigades. It helped transform the existing motley collection of fire brigades into something resembling a uniform fire service governed by consensual working conditions.

This campaign was, then, a significant milestone in the development of trade unionism within the service. After all, the fire service was not particularly fertile ground for the growth of trade unionism at first. In his excellent history of the Fire Brigades Union, Victor Bailey describes how '[p]rofessional firemen were few in number, scattered across the country, shut up in small fire stations, residentially and occupationally segregated from other work groups. Habits of obedience and sentiments of loyalty to the service were instilled by para-military regimes, whether in professional or police brigades. In such an occupational

culture firemen did not readily think in collective terms.’⁸ However, notwithstanding these obstacles, various trade unions had made inroads into fire brigades during the early twentieth century, not least because firefighters eyed the improvements to police conditions with some envy. For example, the Municipal Employees’ Association and the National Union of Corporation Workers both operated small, but active, branches in the London Fire Brigade before the First World War, the Workers’ Union (a forerunner of the Transport and General Workers’ Union) had a fire brigade branch in Manchester by the end of the War, whereas approximately two-thirds of the Birmingham Fire Brigade’s staff were members of the Amalgamated Society of Gas, Municipal and General Workers. There was also an MEA fire brigade branch in Glasgow and a NUCW branch operating in Edinburgh Fire Brigade. However, most large brigades, London and Birmingham included, preferred to operate staff representative bodies internal to their organisations, and refused to recognise these unions; localised control went hand-in-hand with arbitrary disciplinary regulations and diverse working conditions.

The Fire Brigades Union (as it was known from 1930) was formed in this context of fragmented unionism and limited workers’ rights. Its chief goal was to strengthen the bonds of mutual reliance within fire brigades by creating a single national representative body and campaigning for improved conditions of service on lines with that secured by the police. The chief difference with the police campaign, however, was that, unlike with NUPPO, the FBU would play an integral role in shaping the development of the fire service in the longer-term, rather than accept a trade-off between improved conditions and affiliation.

In speaking on behalf of rank-and-file firefighters, this brought the union into contact with the Home Office, which, from 1919, undertook ministerial responsibility for the fire

⁸ Victor Bailey, ‘The Early History of the Fire Brigades Union’, in Victor Bailey (ed.), *Forged in Fire: The History of the Fire Brigades Union* (London, 1992), p.9.

service. It did so through its police department, which was managed by Arthur L. Dixon, an experienced civil servant, and, at the time, a defender of the fire police model and an opponent of police unionism. Dixon did, however, take his cue from the experience of the police reform process, and convinced the home secretary, John Shortt, to establish a select committee in 1920, chaired by the South Leeds MP William Middlebrook, to investigate pay, pensions and hours of duty within the fire service. Although the Committee's terms of reference only included those firefighters working in professional brigades, thereby excluding the retained and volunteer sector, it was intended that any changes adopted would inevitably shape the service as a whole. The Committee took evidence from various witnesses including those representing, for the first time, the rank-and-file and the Union (in the latter case, Jim Bradley, the son of a London station officer and a founder member of Bethnal Green Labour Party, who had served as secretary of the fire brigade branch of the NUCW before becoming assistant secretary to the FTU upon their amalgamation one year earlier). It also spoke directly with rank-and-file firefighters such as John Callaghan, a Birmingham firefighter, who was president of the fire brigade branch of the ASGMGW; Fireman Alfred Collins, who represented the ranks of Southampton Fire Brigade, and Fireman Arthur Henry Wright, who represented Leicester Fire Brigade's personnel. Representatives of the station officers, district officers and superintendents of the London Fire Brigade also gave evidence. How the firefighters were selected to speak is unclear, but it does indicate a willingness to hear the opinions from all ranks, especially those most active in local brigade branches. Whilst the police brigades sent their chief superintendents and chief constables to give evidence, none allowed rank-and-file firefighters to appear, presumably because of the changes to affiliation implemented in 1919.

When questioned about his views on parity between the two services, Dixon was unequivocal in his belief that firefighters did not warrant the same rate of pay as their police

colleagues. Whilst accepting that the modern firefighter had to have ‘certain technical qualifications’ and work in a dangerous environment, the police constable had to have a higher standard of education and legal proficiency in order to carry ‘the burden of individual discretion and responsibility’ placed upon his shoulders. Moreover, ‘[a]s regards exposure, a fireman, of course, is exposed on particular occasions to very severe conditions, but a constable is exposed day in and day out for 8 hours of the day to weather of all sorts ... whereas the fireman ... spends a very considerable portion of his time in the shelter and warmth of a station – to a much greater extent than the typical policeman does.’⁹

Despite Dixon’s efforts to convince otherwise, Middlebrook recommended that firefighters ‘should be treated more or less equal with the Police and more generously than other municipal employees’, especially in terms of pay and pensions. The question of working hours was more contentious: most firefighters, especially in independent brigades like Birmingham, Leicester, Glasgow and Edinburgh, worked the continuous duty system, and the alternatives to this (the 3-shift 8-hour day and the 2-platoon system, which had been recently adopted in London) were deemed too expensive and contentious to roll out at this time. Middlebrook recommended the continuation of continuous duty as the most economical system for local authorities, with the ‘stand-by’ system (8-hours on, 8-hours on stand-by, and 8-hours off, which effectively meant a 16-hour working day) as its preferred alternative.¹⁰

Shortt, however, refused to legislate on the matter, leaving it to the discretion of local authorities, which meant that little was done in those brigades that needed reform the most. Subsequent parliamentary inquiries, notably the Royal Commission on Fire Brigades and Fire Prevention, set up in 1921 but delayed from reporting until 1923, similarly failed to convince

⁹ PP (1920) *Report of the Committee on the Hours, Pay and Conditions of Service of Firemen in Professional Fire Brigades in Great Britain*, XVI, Cmd. 710, p.129, Q.3795.

¹⁰ *Middlebrook Report*, p.6.

the government to take action. The chief obstacle to reform was the Treasury's policy to introduce swingeing cuts to public expenditure through the 'Geddes Axe', named after Sir Eric Geddes, the Conservative minister of transport and chairman of the Committee on National Expenditure, which sought to reverse post-war inflation and return the state to pre-1914 levels of spending. There was even a move to break parity with the police in organisations like the London Fire Brigade, with a proposal by employers to cut firefighters' wages in 1922. That this was successfully challenged by the FTU at the Industrial Court signals its growing influence in London at this time. Similar cuts across provincial Britain were more difficult to overturn because the provincial service enjoyed no statutory basis and the majority of local authorities refused to recognise the union's claims to represent its membership outside of London.

There were some notable improvements, however, such as the extension of pension rights to all professional brigades, albeit not on a par with the police – though as a Private Member's Bill this owed more to the perseverance of the FTU and APFBO than government policy. A ballot on setting up a political fund in 1922 had enabled the FTU to lobby Labour MPs to support the debate on pensions in parliament, as well as to help fund sympathetic candidates for election onto local authorities. Although this marks the beginning of a coordinated approach towards service reform, improvements remained, for the most part, the result of innovative local brigades.

The road to war

The inter-war period was, therefore, a tumultuous time in the fire service's organisation and reform. It attracted growing levels of interest and scrutiny from politicians, officials and journalists who increasingly recognised the need to introduce uniformity in service provision

across the sector even if the money required to do this was absent. The larger independent brigades, with the assistance of the service associations and the FBU, had, by the mid-1930s, disseminated a model of firefighting on the basis of rapid response, specialised skill and collective sacrifice across a large part of industrial Britain. This model even extended into the countryside as borough brigades, with the support of the Home Office, entered into agreements to provide fire protection to rural communities in counties such as Leicestershire, Lanarkshire, Norfolk and North Derbyshire. The era of the motorised fire engine, which was capable of covering large distances much more quickly than the now obsolete steam engines, ushered in a wave of reforms to brigade organisation and technology to enable brigades to collaborate in new ways.

Modernisation was inevitably aided by the gathering global crisis brought on by ‘total war’, which required the mobilisation of peacetime resources in the civil defence of the nation. The various barriers to reform – financial, legal, and personal – dissipated as preparations for war started during the second-half of the 1930s, and completely disappeared once the blitz began. Negotiations between the Home Office and the service associations led to another governmental inquiry, under the chairmanship of Lord Riverdale, in late 1935. The Fire Brigades Union’s Executive Council declined to give evidence to the Committee, which it saw as helping to frame wartime government policy. Published within a few short months, the report finally paved the way for statutory reform by recognising the urgency of preparing the fire service for its inevitable role in the civil defence of the nation against aerial bombardment. In particular, it led to the creation of the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) in 1938, an army of volunteer firefighters who would be trained up by regular firefighters in the event of war. Yet the Riverdale report also recognised the significance of peacetime reform to the long-term modernisation of the service, thereby legitimising the Home Office’s decision, in 1936, to establish a separate fire brigades department, headed by Dixon, which was, three

years later, organised into separate peacetime and wartime divisions. The fire service, it was anticipated, would finally be transformed from what Victor Bailey describes as a ‘ramshackle and archaic organisation’ into a national service on a standard footing.¹¹

The subsequent Fire Brigades Act, which was passed in 1938, had a major bearing on the development of the peacetime service. Fire protection was, for the first time in its history, made the statutory obligation of local government above the level of the parish council. Any concerns about the variation in the quality of service provision across approximately 1,450 fire authorities was offset by the decision to introduce national standards of fire cover and inspection, which would be monitored by the Home Office. Mutual reinforcement schemes were to be further rolled out across the country, and brigades were to be encouraged to update their equipment and standardise their operating procedures to facilitate greater collaboration. Moreover, by signalling the government’s intentions to phase out the police brigades, the Act formally established the independent professional brigade as the model of best practice for fire brigade organisation.

These changes benefitted the FBU, which had worked hard throughout the 1930s to extend its membership across the country, having made membership of ‘all firemen throughout Great Britain’ one of its flagship objectives.¹² By May 1938, it had a national membership of approximately 2,800 firefighters spread across 63 fire brigades, 1,700 (around sixty per cent) of whom worked for the London Fire Brigade. New branches were established across the West Riding (Bradford, Halifax, Huddersfield), the North-West (Blackpool, Bolton, Preston, Warrington) and the West Midlands (Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Walsall) as part of the union’s strategy to broaden its geographical coverage into the urban industrial

¹¹ Bailey, ‘The Early History’, p.40.

¹² Quotation taken from the Fire Brigades Union Revised Rules, 1940, copies of which are available in the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, MSS.346/4/26.

heartlands, though the union still hit a brick wall with many intransigent chief officers. Significant battles took place in police brigades like Blackpool and Preston over the men's right to representation or even to hold trade union meetings at the fire station, which was particularly important for those who worked the continuous duty system.¹³

In addition to its recruitment drive, the FBU also developed its political fund during the mid-1930s, notably in supporting the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, and in calling for a peace front against fascist countries comprised of British Labour, French Socialists and Russian Communists. The union was becoming more politicised under a new wave of younger leaders with communist leanings, which increasingly put it at odds with government policy. The main instigator behind this more active political role was John Horner, a firefighter and former merchant seaman from London, who became general secretary in 1939.

Horner was integral to the expansion of the FBU during the war and its subsequent emergence as the chief negotiator over national conditions of service in 1940. He dealt skilfully with the creation of the AFS, which, in September 1939, mobilised 89,000 men and 6,000 women. This multiplied the strength of most professional brigades tenfold overnight (23,000 auxiliaries were attached to London Fire Brigade alone) and created tensions between the auxiliaries and the regulars, the latter resenting having to train these outsiders in fire brigade work for no extra pay. Nor was it a picnic for the auxiliaries, who received a lower rate of pay than the regulars, a smaller uniform allowance, and fewer entitlements to injury or sick pay. Yet they often volunteered for night-time duty in makeshift fire stations after a long day at work. Regulars and auxiliaries failed to integrate before the blitz started; some chief officers refused to let the auxiliaries fight fires, while others left them without sufficiently qualified leadership when attending emergencies. Recognising that this 'transient

¹³ Membership figures taken from Bailey, 'The Early History', p.37.

horde of wartime auxiliaries'¹⁴ were ripe for membership, Horner convinced the executive committee that it was better for the FBU to organise the AFS rather than leave it to an external body. A separate AFS members' section was formed in 1939, with its own management committee and representatives on the executive committee. Union membership increased from roughly 3,500 in September 1939 to 66,500 in early 1940, including 1,000 women members. For every 1 regular firefighter in the FBU, there were 15 auxiliaries represented. This extended the FBU's influence into new or under-represented parts of the country, including Scotland and the East Midlands, though there were still cases, as in Glasgow and Birmingham, where employers refused to give permission for their regular firefighters to join, or even where the chief officer would refuse to recognise the AFS branch, as was the case in a number of police fire brigades.¹⁵

The FBU had, by June 1940, shortly before the blitz began, become a national organisation. Reluctantly recognising this, the Home Office agreed that it could speak for the AFS on the National Joint Council for Civil Defence Workers, as well as for regular firefighters at local authority level. Local branches continued to spread locally and some chief officers finally began to relent on their opposition to allowing meetings to take place on station grounds.

The blitz and the fire service

That the FBU gained such a strong foothold within the service in 1940 reflects its effectiveness at capitalising upon the high public profile that firefighters enjoyed in the

¹⁴ This quotation is attributed to Sir Walter Citrine, general secretary of the Trades Union Congress from 1926-46.

¹⁵ Membership figures taken from Bailey, 'The Early History', p.45.

months leading up to, and following, the blitz of Britain. Union leaders combatted the unfair image of auxiliary firefighters as “army dodgers” and “the darts brigade” in the early part of 1940, and, when the blitz began, cited the multiple instances of bravery as evidence of their participation within the war effort. Firefighters, regular and auxiliary alike, were suddenly transformed into ‘heroes with grimy faces’, who faced the nightly onslaught of the German bombers armed only with branch-pipe and helmet for protection. They waded through boiling oil pit fires, worked through the night to stem the progress of raging fires caused by incendiary bombs, avoided bomb craters as they drove through burning cities, protected major landmarks from destruction, and steadfastly remained on the city streets whilst the general public ran for cover.

This was a powerful image of the fire service united in the face of a common enemy, and it was understandably appropriated by the union, service associations and firefighters themselves as their contribution to ‘the people’s war’. It was also a historical image, drawing on the names and legacy of key figures in the service’s past, notably James Braidwood, who continued to epitomise the service’s sacrificial culture. Films, popular books and magazines celebrated the sacrifice of the firefighters to their nation, most famously Humphrey Jennings for the Crown Film Unit with his 1943 masterpiece *Fires Were Started*, which depicts one-night of blitz firefighting in the East End of London. The film is serious, tragic, emotional and magnificently simple in its narrative of masculine camaraderie and self-sacrifice. Even comedy greats like Tommy Trinder got into the action, starring in Ealing Studios’ uneven, but sometimes hilarious, *The Bells Go Down* (1943), which was loosely based on a book written by an anonymous AFS firefighter in 1941. The scene in which Trinder’s down-to-earth Cockney firefighter answers a telephone from the top of a ladder whilst attending an

air-raided fire cheekily evoked images of warmth and good humour that sit alongside Jennings' more detached, but realistic, portrayal of stoic firefighter masculinity.¹⁶

The FBU championed the cause of its AFS members, securing changes to the derisory civilian injuries scheme. The AFS Section also campaigned hard for an increase in wages, pensions, a funeral allowance, a shorter working week (the AFS worked longer hours than any other civil defence organisation), as well as improved station quarters and a spare uniform. With improved conditions, it was believed, would come integration between the different groups, which would foster a greater sense of unity within the vastly expanded service.

This drive for unity was accelerated by the decision, taken by the home secretary, Herbert Morrison, in May 1941, to nationalise the fire service for the duration of hostilities. Legislation was rushed through parliament, which merged fire authorities on a regional model, thereby creating 33 fire areas across England and Wales, with another six in Scotland (a separate national service was created for Northern Ireland in 1942), each of which was put under the command of a fire force commander, who was usually an existing chief fire officer for a large professional brigade. Auxiliaries became full-time firefighters on the same pay and conditions as the regulars; there were many instances of auxiliaries being promoted to officer class above regular firefighters. Integration was duly forced upon the fire service and not without some resentment (including from some chief fire officers who were forced to take early retirement). A standard 72-hour working week was adopted (48-hours on, 24-hours off),

¹⁶ For more on the cultural legacy of the blitz to the fire service, see Shane Ewen, 'A service forged in the flames: the blitz, wartime fire-fighting and the National Fire Service', in Mark Clapson and Peter Larkham (eds.), *The Blitz and its Legacy: Wartime Destruction to Post-war Reconstruction* (Ashgate, 2012), pp.47-60. For a good overview, see Francis Beckett, *Firefighters and the Blitz* (London, 2010).

along with a national minimum rate of pay. Training would be provided by a national college at Saltdean, near Brighton, which devised its curriculum based on the existing work of the Institution of Fire Engineers. At its 1943 peak, the NFS comprised almost 350,000 personnel, including 100,000 full-time men, nearly 30,000 full-time women, with the remaining 220,000 part-time staff (including 48,000 women).

The establishment of the NFS took an impressive 13 weeks, and historians have been kind to Herbert Morrison for taking such decisive action in the midst of war. But the reality is that the reform process was the culmination of a long drawn-out process of incremental reform over the previous generation, which involved sustained engagement with service associations, unions, and firefighters themselves, all of whom had been pushing for reform since at least the mid-1930s. It took the horrors of the blitz to finally drive home to the government the inadequacies in the existing system of fire protection in the country.

The creation of the NFS was significant in two main ways to the long-term professionalisation of the service. First, it marked the final death knell for the police fire brigades, which were ignominiously dismantled and statutorily abolished in 1947. A number of northern industrial cities, particularly Hull, Liverpool and Manchester, which were protected by police brigades, were cited for having inadequate fire protection during air-raids in springtime 1941. Critics cited poor organisation, weak leadership, incomplete operational knowledge, and a lack of integration between the auxiliaries and regulars as chief defects of the fire police model. Whilst some of the independent brigades suffered from some of these defects themselves, the police brigades were universally criticised as being operationally and administratively obsolete organisations for the defence of local communities against attack.

Second, the creation of the NFS effectively brought together the government and the labour movement to discuss the conditions of the service. The FBU was a key actor in the

work of the NFS, and its Firemen's Charter Campaign in late 1941 sought to introduce improved conditions across the service, including a national minimum wage, full sick pay, a less authoritarian discipline code, and a 72-hour working week. The Home Office finally recognised it as the legitimate representative of rank-and-file firefighters in May 1942 (officers would be represented by the National Fire Service Officers' Association, thereby creating a split in the service's representation that continues to some extent today). The modern professional fire service would be disciplined, uniformed, state-controlled and unionised.

A return to local control

Nationalisation was only ever a temporary measure because Morrison had promised to return the service to local authority control after the war, although he never specified in what form it would take. From 1943 discussions started about what form the post-war service should take. Everyone associated with the service had an opinion – from the professional associations to the local authority associations – and they nearly all agreed that they did not want to see the service returned to its pre-1938 roots. Nor did some of the more vocal critics wish to see a return to the model created by the 1938 Fire Brigades Act: John Horner, especially, believed that to simply revert back to the pre-war system of local control would be 'a serious and short-sighted blunder'; 1,450 fire brigades was too many for an efficient, professional service. Instead, Horner wanted to see the service follow the model being adopted in the proposed national healthcare reforms with regional boards based on modern boundaries and underpinned by national inspection and government subsidy. This regional approach, published in *What Kind of Fire Service?*, was a compromise aimed at those who favoured the retention of a national structure, which Horner rightly thought to be too cumbersome for a

smaller, scaled back peacetime service, and those nostalgic for a return to the ‘hodge-podge’ days of the parish pump and the police brigades. Horner’s plan, which also incorporated the important work done by the union during its Charter Campaign, is an important historical document because it recognises the significance of building upon the foundations created by his predecessors in the union as well as the service associations, whilst also recognising that ‘one cannot unscramble eggs’.¹⁷

There was a considerable amount of support for Horner’s regional structure within the Home Office. A departmental Committee on the Post-War Fire Service, established in 1943, drew upon the experience and expertise of senior fire officers, including the aptly-named Aylmer Firebrace, the Home Office’s chief fire advisor (and a former deputy chief officer of London Fire Brigade), many of whom had cut their teeth under the pre-war system. Unsurprisingly, given that they had benefitted from the nationalisation of the service, they advocated the retention of a regional structure similar to that proposed by the FBU. They wanted to retain the advantages of national control within a devolved system of administration, citing the single chain of command, operational flexibility, centrally controlled appointments, promotions and discipline, and national training as examples of best practice under the NFS structure. However, Herbert Morrison, and his successor, Chuter Ede, were committed to restoring local authority control, and the Committee was tasked with finding the best way to do this with minimal disruption to operations.

The compromise reached was the 1947 Fire Services Act, which returned the service to local authority control, but introduced national controls and uniformity through annual inspection, standards of fire cover, pay and conditions. The stick of inspection by His Majesty’s Fire Services Inspectorate was offset by the carrot of an exchequer subsidy, the

¹⁷ Quotations from Ewen, *Fighting Fires*, p.147.

first of its kind in the history of the independent service. Control was devolved to fewer and larger local authorities than in 1938, which created a more streamlined structure comprised of 50 county councils and 75 county boroughs in England and Wales, and the 11 counties and boroughs in Scotland.¹⁸ A Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council – with representation from the local authority associations, HMFSI, and the FBU – was formed to advise the Home Secretary on service policy. Pay and conditions would be settled nationally through the National Joint Council for Local Authorities' Fire Brigades, with representatives from the local authority associations and the staff associations, including the FBU.

The 1947 Act was also important for statutorily abolishing the police brigades. It also gave powers to fire authorities to employ their personnel on other non-fire special service incidents, including rescuing people from road traffic accidents, and the provision of fire prevention and other safety work. It symbolised the passing of an old age of fire protection and the beginnings of a new dawn in safety.

For the majority of firefighters, the organisational structure of the service meant far less to them than their burgeoning status as uniformed professionals. The improved pay and conditions, and shorter, 60-hour working week, certainly helped offset any transitional difficulties. However, the local government paymasters on the Employers' Side of the NJC set out to return it to the 1930s days of a Cinderella service, chiefly by ending parity between the police and fire services, which the FBU had achieved at the Ministry of Labour's Industrial Court in 1946. When, therefore, the police received a large pay rise in 1949, the Employers' Side challenged the FBU's claim for parity, and the Industrial Court sided with

¹⁸ This system continued until local government reform in the early 1970s, when the sector was further streamlined to 62 fire authorities in England, Wales and Scotland through the merger of county borough brigades with non-metropolitan counties, and the creation of the metropolitan counties (West Midlands, Greater Manchester and Merseyside).

the employers. Wages quickly drifted apart and, by September 1951, there was a disparity of 35 shillings (approximately £40) between the police constable's and firefighter's weekly starting wage.

The subsequent 'spit and polish' demonstrations of November 1951, when firefighters across the country underwent a 48-hour boycott of non-essential duties, marked the first time in the service's history that rank-and-file firefighters withdrew their labour *en masse*. Sanctioned by the union, some 8,000 firefighters refused routine orders to do station work, drills and inspections. This was as much a defence of the firefighters' hard-fought professional status as it was a battle for improved pay and is reflected in the title of an FBU pamphlet published in the same year, *In Defence of Fire Brigades*. Firefighters, especially those recruited to the service during or after the war, defined themselves as skilled professional workers, responding to a growing number and variety of emergencies and providing valuable fire safety advice to local communities. They were, as David Englander describes them, 'a cut above' other manual workers in the public services, and rightly resented being treated as 'mere labourers'.¹⁹ The universally hated 'spit and polish' traditions, of washing and buffing up all the brasswork in the fire station, and even in some cases cleaning the chief officer's private toilet, sat uncomfortably alongside this modern identity. Firefighters had worked hard and sacrificed themselves in this long and fierce battle to create a professional service that was revered in local communities, and they were not going to give it up without a fight.

Conclusion

¹⁹ David Englander, 'The Fire Brigades Union and its Members', in Bailey (ed.), *Forged in Fire*, p.130.

This historical overview of the development of the fire service reveals two clear conclusions. Firstly, it shows that the long campaign to create a professional fire service, independent of external control, was worth persevering with. The ‘fire police’ model had been widely discredited by the 1930s; it created tensions and professional rivalries within the fire service, enjoyed little support or interest from senior police officers, and had been proven to be a less effective service than that provided by the independent brigades. In fact, the ‘fire police’ model was only really popular amongst anti-reformists within local government who saw it as a cheap way of providing a service that was increasingly out of kilter with the interests of the wider community. The operational roles and skills-set of the two services were vastly different: police officers could not be expected to understand the combustibility of modern buildings even less so than firefighters could be called upon to help keep the peace. The decision to formally separate the two services, symbolically achieved with the abolition of the police brigades in the midst of the Second World War, severed the historic ties between the two services, which subsequently drifted apart in the decades that followed. The fire service was able to develop its own organisational model, as a national emergency service delivered through local government, free from police interference. Fire brigades and police forces continued to work together at emergency incidents, and increasingly so when responding to the growing number of traffic accidents on Britain’s roads, but they also had clearly demarcated roles and responsibilities which made them operationally and administratively separate entities.

Secondly, it is no over-statement to say that the modern fire service was created by the firefighters themselves, and was shaped by the pioneering work of the professional independent brigades that protected large urban areas, in conjunction with the service associations. Brigades like London, Birmingham, Leicester, Croydon and others were far more proactive in diversifying the operational role of the firefighters, introducing additional

services like fire prevention and inspection, than the smaller retained, voluntary and police brigades. In this, they were actively supported by the service associations, including the Fire Brigades Union, all of whom recognised the significance of a diversified role for the service's professionalization. This innovative work filtered down into the smaller brigades through mutual assistance schemes, professional accreditation and training programmes, and subsequently formed the bedrock of activities in the post-war fire service. This signalled the transition away from a purely reactionary firefighting service to a service that proactively seeks to prevent fires and other accidents from taking place as well as responding to a variety of complex emergencies as and when they occur. It also further contributed to the evolution of different working practices and organisational cultures within the fire and police services. From the fire prevention departments that were formed in fire brigades from the 1950s onwards, with their community education programmes directed at vulnerable groups, the beefed up responsibility of qualified firefighters to provide fire safety inspections and certification from the 1960s and 1970s, to the combined provision of street ambulance services, which many fire brigades offered up to the mid-1970s, transformed the fire service into an increasingly sophisticated and specialised vocation staffed by highly trained professionals. The historic image of the firefighter as a jack-of-all-trades was over.